Heroin seizures and opiate trafficking along the Caucasus route
About the Afghan Opiate Trade Project

The opiates produced in Afghanistan continue to pose a threat to public health, governance and security in the region and beyond at global level. Trafficked to almost every continent worldwide, the Afghan opiate market was valued at over $60 billion globally in 2009. To address the need for systematic monitoring, comprehensive and consolidated analytical information about the multidimensional threat of the global illicit trade in Afghan opiates, the UNODC Afghan Opiate Trade Project (AOTP) was established in 2008. The project has produced a number of regional and global threat assessment reports and has been collaborating extensively with numerous national and regional policy making bodies and law enforcement agencies to provide the international community with a better understanding of the threat posed by the opiates produced in Afghanistan.

About the AOTP Update

The AOTP Update series is designed to provide brief, regular reporting on emerging patterns and trends of the global situation pertaining to Afghan opiates. Given the speed at which changes in the illicit opiate markets occur, it is important to have a simple sustainable mechanism for regular information sharing.
Heroin seizures and opiate trafficking along the Caucasus route

Introduction

The Caucasus region is located at the border of Europe and Asia, situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The Greater Caucasus mountain range acts as a natural barrier separating Eastern Europe from Western Asia, while the Caucasus region itself is divided into a northern and southern part. The northern Caucasus lies entirely within the Russian Federation, it includes the North Caucasian Federal District and two Federal subjects lying within the Southern Federal District – namely Krasnodar Krai and the Republic of Adygea. The southern Caucasus is divided between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The trafficking of opiates through the Caucasus emerged from around 2015 as an additional supply route for the European and, to a lesser extent, Russian markets. As such the Caucasus route merges with and feeds into both the Balkan and the northern routes, with opiates moving from south to north into the Russian Federation and from east to west into Europe.

Opiate seizures in the Caucasus region

Seizure data reported to the UNODC, suggests that large flows of opiates have occurred in recent years, with significant seizures of heroin reported in the southern Caucasus in the years 2014 and 2016 (see case studies at the end of this update).4 Azerbaijan, according to the 2018 UNODC World Drug Report was the 9th highest amongst countries reporting the largest quantities of heroin seized in 2016, with seizures amounting to 1,186 kg, and continues to be the largest heroin reporting country in the southern Caucasus.

Drug seizures are an indicator which measures a mix of trends: changes in the supply and changes on Law Enforcement capacity, knowledge and priority. The size of reported individual heroin seizures is also an indicator of the potential scale of trafficking. In all three countries of the southern Caucasus, some significant individual seizures nearing or exceeding 100 kg have been reported to the UNODC in recent years4. Armenia reported a single seizure of 850 kg of heroin in 2014 that accounted for 99% of the heroin seized in the country in that year. In 2016, more than 80% of the quantity of heroin seized in Azerbaijan came from two significant individual seizures of 505 kg and 468 kg. According to data entered into the UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform, heroin seizures in Azerbaijan continue to be relatively high for the region, with 540 kg of heroin seized in 2018 and 459 kg seized in the first 5 months of 2019. Although less than the peak of heroin seizures reported in 2014, the quantities of heroin seized Azerbaijan in 2018 and 2019 are greater than the quantities of heroin seized in the Southern Caucasus annually between 2008 and 2013, 2014 and 2017. 2016, also saw one significant seizure accounted for almost 100 kg of heroin seized in Georgia4. Seizures are a direct indicator of law enforcement activity and are thus influenced by national capabilities and priorities. Looking at the data within a wider geographical context, it is interesting to note that the increases in heroin seizures in the southern Caucasus in 2014 and 2016 were accompanied by decreases in the quantities seized in neighbouring Turkey over the same period, although seizures in Turkey have remained at much higher level than those made in the Caucasus.

Overall in the Russian Federation, heroin seizures have been following a declining trend since 2011, with an increase observed only in 2014.5 Data specifically from the northern Caucasus in the Russian Federation is less...
clear, however individual seizure cases reported to the UNODC indicate that a degree of heroin trafficking takes place there although, until recently, at a much lower level than in 2009. A seizure of almost 200 kg of heroin was reported in the Republic of Dagestan in 200911 but subsequently, seizures of heroin averaged around 31 kg annually in the period 2013 – 2015 and fell to a total of 8 kg in 2016.

**Defining trafficking routes through the Caucasus**

Broadly speaking, the Caucasus route involves the trafficking of heroin from Afghanistan, through the southern and northern parts of the Caucasus and into the Balkan and northern routes to supply markets in Europe and in the Russian Federation12. Since 2010, the Caucasus route has been identified as an alternative for the trafficking of opiates to European markets circumventing Turkey and has been described as the northern branch of the Balkan route13. Opiates enter the Caucasus from the Islamic Republic of Iran and from Central Asia by land or possibly, to a lesser extent via the Caspian Sea – mainly via Azerbaijan14. Like all major trafficking routes, the Caucasus route really consists of several smaller sub-routes, some of which merge into each other. These sub-routes are dynamic and evolve over time as Drug Trafficking Organisations (DTOs) adapt in response to law enforcement activities and local conditions. From the Caucasus, opiates are further trafficked via the Black sea to Eastern Europe, or overland to the Russian Federation. Although most opiates trafficked via the southern Caucasus appear to be trafficked to Eastern Europe, more rarely opiates are trafficked to other destinations, for example a 2011 seizure of 89 kg of heroin in Yerevan Airport was destined for the United States of America15. In September 2015, in an example of trafficking from west to east along the Caucasus route, 118 kg of heroin was seized in Kazakhstan having been trafficked from Turkey, via Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, before crossing the Caspian Sea by ferry to the Kazakh port of Aktau16.

The following lists seizures made in single countries, describing locations and routes followed suggesting where trafficking may happen from each country to its bordering countries.

**Armenia:** The borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan17, and Armenia and Turkey are closed18, thus reducing the relative attractiveness of Armenia for opiate traffickers. Although a 2010 case of trafficking of heroin into Armenia from Turkey across the border fence was reported in the media19 showing that small scale trafficking across the closed border can happen, seizures occur mostly through the southern border with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the northern border with Georgia20. Almost all the heroin seizures reported in Armenia in the past few years occurred in the capital Yerevan and in the two border areas21. Opium and morphine seizures have also been reported in Yerevan and at the southern border between 2012 and 201622. Opiates enter Armenia through the border with the Islamic Republic of Iran, in particular the Meghri border crossing, and are then smuggled across the country, predominantly by road23, towards the border with Georgia. Seizures of heroin at the Yerevan airport have also been reported to the UNODC24 and in the media25. According to media reports
from 2011, 90 kg of heroin concealed in consumer electronics seized at the Yerevan airport en-route to the Netherlands and Denmark.26

**Azerbaijan:** Based on seizure data, opiates are trafficked into Azerbaijan primarily through its southern border with the Islamic Republic of Iran, through the Astara border crossing.27 Data from the Azerbaijan State Customs Committee shows that of the 210 drug seizures that occurred in Azerbaijan in 2017, 184 (or 87.6 per cent) came from Iran, an increase of 51.9 percent over the 109 seizures that were reported as originating from Iran in 2016.28 In recent years, significant seizures were reported at the Astara border checkpoint, including a seizure of 505 kg of heroin concealed in food and destined for Belgium in 2016.29 and two seizures of 515 kg of heroin concealed in food and destined for Ukraine were seized at the Samur checkpoint on the border with the Russian Federation.30 Seizures, albeit of much smaller quantities, have also been reported in the wider border area at varying distances from official border crossings, suggesting the existence of smaller scale trafficking, by couriers, through other parts of the border.31 From the border, heroin is trafficked towards Baku with seizures in and around the capital itself accounting for almost 40 per cent of all individual seizures reported in 2016.32 Ferries connect the port of Baku and the port in Alat to ports of all individual seizures reported in 2016.32 Ferries connect the port of Baku and the port in Alat to ports of Batumi, including a seizure of 115 kg of heroin at the Samur checkpoint on the border with the Russian Federation.33 Data on opiate trafficking via the Azerbaijani enclave of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic is limited, however a seizure of around 105 kg of heroin destined for Turkey was reported from there by the Azerbaijani customs in 2018.34

**Georgia:** According to seizure data, the majority of heroin enters Georgia via its southern neighbours. Heroin smuggled from Azerbaijan and Armenia is trafficked through Tbilisi towards the ports on the Black Sea coast. Several seizures have been reported in the port of Batumi, including a seizure of around 96 kg of heroin in 2016, that was destined for the Netherlands.35 Heroin seizures show that trafficking from and to Turkey occurs across the land border between the two countries. On the Georgian side of the border, seizures have been reported in the areas surrounding the Sarpi and Vale border crossings, including a seizure of 115 kg of heroin in 2013 in a vehicle in the city of Akhaltsikhe about a dozen

Map 1: Heroin seizures in the northern Caucasus (Russian Federation), above 1 kg, 2015–2019

Source: UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
kilometres from the border. The Sarpi border crossing is located about 20 km from Batumi where heroin can exit the country via the sea port. Seizures show that heroin also exits Georgia via the border with Turkey. According to government and media sources, almost three tonnes of heroin infused liquid destined for Turkey were seized in Georgia in 2014. Heroin is further trafficked from the Georgian ports on the Black Sea via ferry to Odessa, or destinations in the European Union such as Romania or Bulgaria where it re-enters the eastern branch of the main Balkan route for trafficking onward to the Netherlands and other countries in West and Central Europe. Although the bulk of seized heroin had previously transited Bulgaria (71 per cent in 2014) in 2015 Romania, where the bulk of the seized heroin had previously transited, reported for the first time in 2015 that the majority (93 per cent) of seizures had transited Ukraine and only a small proportion (7 per cent) had transited Bulgaria. However, 2016 seizure data for this route indicate diverging trends: heroin and morphine seizures increased sharply in Azerbaijan and Georgia in 2016 but declined sharply in Ukraine and Romania, which could be an indication of a share of the opiate supply going undetected, or that no indication that increased law enforcement operations in the countries of the Caucasus have prevented much of the onward trafficking to Ukraine and Romania. Most of the heroin seized in Romania in 2016 had transited Turkey and Bulgaria. There is one official border crossing between Georgia and the Russian Federation and parts of the border are contested territory following conflicts in 2008 and 2016. There is no information on opiate seizures at this border, which could indicate that any trafficking goes undetected, or that none takes place.

Northern Caucasus (Russian Federation): Opiate trafficking to the wider Russian Federation is conducted mostly through the northern route, via Central Asia. However, the Caucasus route does supply some of the Russian Federation, with the country reporting that around 20 per cent of the opiates seized in the country in 2015 had been trafficked from Afghanistan, via the Caucasus. Data on seizures after 2015 is less clear, as the Russian Federation only reported heroin seizures from either Central Asia or “Unknown” locations. Opiates enter the Caucasus by land via Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan or via the Caspian Sea. In 2016, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan were listed among the main transit countries for heroin seized in the Russian Federation as a whole. Seized heroin trafficked via the Caspian ports has been reported in the past by media sources and government sources. Individual Drug Seizure records from 2012 to 2016 from this part of the Russian Federation showed a total of 0.556kg of heroin being seized in the port city of Makhachkala in 2012 and 1.5 kg being seized in 2014, but no seizures in the ports of Olya or Astrakhan. Additionally, 0.655kg was seized in the wider Republic of Dagestan, of which Makhachkala is the regional capital. Seized heroin entering the northern Caucasus from Kazakhstan was trafficked predominantly by land via cars or trains. Trafficking by road and rail is a common trafficking method along the northern route and according to media sources seizures of heroin have been reported in the media on passenger trains between Attyrau (Kazakhstan) and Astrakhan in the northern Caucasus (Russian Federation). Trafficking into the northern Caucasus from Azerbaijan occurs predominantly through the land border which includes several checkpoints for road, rail and pedestrian traffic. Seizures show that from the northern Caucasus, heroin is trafficked to the Moscow hub along the Astrakhan – Volgograd – Voronezh Oblast – Moscow route or the Baku (Azerbaijan) – Rostov (Russian Federation) – Moscow axis. An alternative sub-route through the north Caucasus, and one which sees greater seizures, connects Makhalaka to Vladikavkaz and then to major towns including Stavropol, Krasnodar and Rostov-on-Don. From the Moscow hub, heroin is redistributed to other regions to supply the retail market, including back to the northern Caucasus. The northern Caucasus has, on occasion, been used for the trafficking of heroin into eastern Europe. In 2009, customs officers in the Republic of Dagestan, at the border checkpoint between Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, seized 197 kg of heroin destined for Belarus, although there is little indication that trafficking from the northern Caucasus to Europe currently occurs.

Trafficking methods, Drug Trafficking Organisations (DTOs) and concealment methodologies

Opiate trafficking through the Caucasus predominantly occurs via land-based methods. Cars and trucks are widely used – for example in 2016, around 46 per cent of

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38 Georgia Individual Drug Seizure records 2013.
43 Georgian State Commission on Migration Issues: http://migration.commission.ge/index.php/article_id=152&clang=1
47 Kommersant News Agency https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/211631
48 Russian Federation IDS records 2012-2016.
49 UNODC “Afghan Opiate Trafficking along the northern route” June 2018.
52 Sputnik News Agency https://sputniknews.com/russia/20091008185698797/
the Black and Caspian seas, although it cannot be discounted that smaller private boats, and commercial shipping are used to traffic opiates as well and may land opiates on isolated areas of land away from the major ports and from law enforcement attention. Concealment methods appear to be basic along the Caucasus route and are in keeping with previously identified methods used for land trafficking in the region. Most seized opiates were hidden in vehicles or in licit trade goods, such as agricultural or consumer products, however, on occasion more sophisticated concealment methods have also been identified as heroin-containing liquids seized in Georgia in 2014.

Heroin trafficking into Europe is dominated by Turkish, Albanian-speaking and Pakistani DTOs. According to research by the ECDDMA, Turkish DTOs are known to cooperate with local organisations along the trafficking routes to Europe, including along the Caucasus route, and increasingly use a decentralised model of operation, as seen with trafficking activity in other global markets. Local Caucasus based DTOs historically had links to DTOs in the wider Russian Federation and Europe; for example, Azerbaijani DTOs had connections within the Russian Federation and were reportedly involved in trafficking opiates from the southern to the northern Caucasus and then within the Russian Federation. Russian data on the

nationalities of those arrested for drug offences provided to the UNODC, shows that the share of Azeri, Armenian and Georgian citizens is very small among those arrested for drug trafficking offenses. Between 2009 and 2017 there was a 64% decrease in the number of Azerbaijani citizens arrested in the Russian Federation for drug offenses and a decrease of 73% in the number of Georgian citizens arrested in the Russian Federation. By contrast, over the same period the number of Armenian citizens arrested in the Russian Federation increased by 103%. However, over the period 2009 to 2017, the average percentage of south Caucasus citizens arrested in the Russian Federation for drug offenses was 0.38%, a very small number relative to total arrests, the majority of which were Russia. Disaggregated data for the north Caucasus region of the Russian Federation was not available.

Turkish DTOs have been reported as working with Georgian DTOs and individual facilitators along the Caucasus route. A common methodology appears to involve Turkish trafficking groups establishing transport companies in Georgia, to facilitate heroin trafficking activity. According to previous research in relation to the northern Caucasus, Chechnya had been a central hub in the transport of opiates from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe, and Chechen trafficking organisations were key to supplying Europe and the Russian Federation, although that may have shifted to Dagestan around 2013.

Seizures of other drug types along the Caucasus route

According to seizure data available to the UNODC, the Caucasus route is mainly an opiate trafficking route. However, law enforcement authorities in the region have also seized small quantities of other drug types, suggesting that limited trafficking of other drugs occurs. Small scale cocaine trafficking has been reported. For example, in 2015 13 kg of cocaine was seized at Yeveran airport, having been trafficked from Brazil to Armenia via the UAE, while in 2016 39.9 g of cocaine was trafficked into Baku airport via St Petersburg. Between August and October 2015, over 15 kg of cocaine was seized in five separate seizures at Tbilisi airport being trafficked into Georgia, mostly from Brazil, via the UAE. These small-scale seizures however, suggest that the Caucasus is not a major cocaine trafficking route. Current seizure data relating to synthetic drug trafficking through the Caucasus route is also limited. A small number of seizures reported to UNODC suggests that low volume trafficking of synthetics and ATS occurs through the Caucasus. In September 2014, Georgian authorities seized 157 tablets of buprenorphine reportedly being trafficked from Israel into Georgia. Georgia also reported an “unprecedented” seizure of 5.7 kg of Amphetamine transiting from Armenia in 2015, as well as 492 ecstasy tablets seized in the Georgian Black Sea port of Batumi in 2016. Trafficking of...
heroin precursor chemicals through the southern Caucasus to Afghanistan also appears limited, based on data reported to the INCB, with Armenia reporting the seizure of a single litre of acetic anhydride (AA) in 2011. Georgia and Azerbaijan reported no AA seizures to the INCB, however in March 2018 Georgia reported two large seizures of acetic anhydride at the Poti Port Customs Unit (PCU) (4,700k and 10,000 kg) to the UNODC Container Control Programme. Data on acetic anhydride trafficking and seizures through the north Caucasus is unavailable, however previous UNODC research suggests that acetic anhydride trafficking from Russia to Afghanistan has declined considerably between 2011 and the present.

Dynamics which may affect the Caucasus route

 Trafficking routes are dynamic and flexible as DTOs adapt their methods in response to evolving risks and opportunities, such as law enforcement activities, as well as political, economic and security issues. Given that the Caucasus route feeds into the Balkan and northern route, it is also impacted by changes occurring along those routes. There are different ongoing dynamics which could further affect the Caucasus route.

Expansion of opiate production in Afghanistan

In recent years the quantity of opiates produced in Afghanistan has dramatically increased – with significant increases in poppy cultivation starting in 2015, continuing up to 2017’s record high of 308,000 hectares, and 2018’s 263,000ha (the second largest level of opium poppy cultivation on record). Opium production has also increased over the same period, increasing from an estimated 3,300 metric tons (mt) produced in 2015 to the record 9,000 mt estimated to have been produced in 2017, and 6,400 mt in 2018. Although it may take time for the level of poppy cultivation to impact heroin markets far from its source, it is expected that more high-quality, low-cost heroin produced from these harvests has begun to filter into consumer markets, possibly leading to further expansion and diversification of trafficking routes and methods.

Security developments and border management along the Balkan route

Turkey, a major part of the Balkan route, has significantly increased its border security in response to several security issues in recent years. Following an initial phase of relative porosity on its border with the Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey moved to strengthen border controls beginning in 2013 and hardening in 2015. Between 2015 and 2018 Turkey endured multiple terrorist attacks on its military, police and civilian population by several Islamic, political and separatist groups, and sought to protect its borders from the spillover from regional conflicts in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Conflicts in the wider Middle Eastern region led to the Turkish government building a 900km wall along the Turkey/Syria border and further strengthening the country’s borders with Iraq and Iran to reduce both cross border movement of terrorist and insurgent groups, and migrants. In addition to physical barriers, other security measures were also put in place, for example the Turkish government authorised the roll-out of an automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) systems across all its provinces, each linked to Jandarma surveillance databases (Jandarma Integrated Communications and Information System (JEMUS)). Turkey’s security response to these terrorist and militant groups may have had the additional effect of putting additional pressure on drug traffickers as well, forcing them to seek alternative routes.

Increased European security responses to migrant flows

Following a major surge in migration through Greece which started in 2015, countries in south-eastern Europe tightened their own border security to limit migration from the Middle East, Africa and South West Asia. Some EU countries including Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, and Slovenia, re-introduced border controls and strengthened their border security. Border crossings in various countries along the Balkan route have also undergone significant modernisation in the past decade with customs and counter narcotics units effectively using modern scanning equipment, detection dogs and intelligence-led targeting of a range of illicit activity.

Regional dynamics

The Caucasus region has been affected by conflict, post-conflict instability, harm minimisation

87 "Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants” UNODC, Vienna , 2018.
Azerbaijan and Armenia are in a state of conflict and the border between the two countries remains closed. Conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia in 2016 has impacted on cross border co-operation. This limited ability to coordinate law enforcement activity is in contrast with the increases in security along the Balkan route, described above.

Opiate demand in the Caucasus

Data on opiate demand and consumption in the northern and southern Caucasus is very limited. The region appears to be mainly a transit route for opiate consumer markets in the wider Russian Federation and Europe, rather than feeding a large regional market. In Georgia, problem drug users reportedly turned to heroin in the late 1990s until approximately 2003-04. Since then, home-made stimulants prepared from pharmaceutical products have been among the most widespread injected drugs. A home-made opioid, “Krokodil”, was also used in Georgia, as was the case in the Russian Federation. Data officially reported to UNODC on consumption in the region is limited. In 2010 Georgia reported an annual prevalence rate of 1.50. Armenia has not reported such data to UNODC. Data from Azerbaijan's State Statistical Committee suggested that drug use (of all types of drugs, not just opiates) had risen by 3.1% between 2015 and 2016 rising from 28,555 registered users to 29,448 in 2016, while data from Azerbaijan’s ARQ submission to the UNODC suggests that the country had 21,000 registered opioid users in 2017. Further research is required to gain a better understanding of drug use patterns and trends in the region, and to evaluate if the quantities of heroin transiting through the region have led to an increase in opiate use.
Azerbaijan

**APRIL 2016.** 500 kg of heroin concealed in boxes of grapes were found by Azerbaijani customs in a truck. The drugs came from the Islamic Republic of Iran and were reportedly destined for Belgium. The driver, a Belarus citizen, was arrested and subsequently sentenced together with a Turkish collaborator. The truck was registered in Georgia.

Source: [https://www.azatutyun.am/a/28829196.html](https://www.azatutyun.am/a/28829196.html)

**MAY 2018.** Azerbaijani customs officers in the Astara district intercepted a shipment of 515 kg of heroin concealed in a truck entering from the Islamic Republic of Iran. The drugs were intended to be transported by ship to Europe via Georgia.


**JULY 2018.** 105.4 kg of heroin hidden in a truck and transiting through the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic were seized by customs officers. The drugs were intercepted at the Julfa border crossing on their way to Turkey.


**JULY 2018.** Azerbaijani customs officers intercepted a shipment of drugs from the Islamic Republic of Iran destined for Ukraine. A cargo vehicle driven by an Azerbaijani citizen was intercepted at the border checkpoint in Astara district. 260 kg of heroin were found in two pallets, in 25 polyethylene bags disguised as Najı Sodium Bicarbonate Fire Extinguishing Powder.


Bulgaria

**OCTOBER 2015.** 42 kg of heroin were seized in the Black sea port of Bourgas in Bulgaria. The drugs were hidden in the wheel rims of a truck arriving on a ferry from Batumi, Georgia. The truck had German transit plates. The driver, a Turkish citizen, was arrested.


Georgia

**JULY 2014.** Georgian law enforcement seized 2.79 tons of liquid heroin hidden in plastic barrels and carried by truck. The shipment had entered the country from Azerbaijan. According to the Georgian Interior Ministry, the drugs were intended for international transit and were en-route to Turkey. Two Georgian citizens were detained.

Source: [https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27473](https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27473)

**JUNE 2016.** Georgian authorities seized 356 packages of heroin hidden inside compartment in a cargo container in the port of Batumi on the Black sea. Almost 178 kg of drugs were seized.


Romania

**JULY 2015.** Two trucks carrying 333 kg of heroin were seized in Romania. The drugs were reportedly transported via Azerbaijan, Turkey and Ukraine.


Russian Federation

**MAY 2019.** Officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for the city of Vladikavkaz of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania detained a 27-year-old native of one of neighbouring countries on suspicion of illegal sale of drugs in a contactless way and seized 140 grams of heroin during a personal search.

Source: [https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27473](https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27473)
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Recent AOTP publications

The Afghan opiate trade
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